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ABSTRACT

Students preparing for a career in working with young children can benefit from working on meaningful activities and projects. This paper discusses ways to engage early childhood teacher education students in activities and projects that model the use of these methods in the classroom. The paper describes as an example a long-term project undertaken in an early childhood education course. The project began with students participating in choosing a topic they were interested in researching: all-day compared with half-day or every-other-day kindergarten. Students helped to design survey and interview instruments. They sent surveys to every kindergarten teacher in the state, distributed parent questionnaires, and interviewed children at participating schools. They entered the data into spreadsheets and helped to analyze the results. The project developed over time, culminating in a presentation at the university undergraduate research showcase. Students gained firsthand experience in taking part in a project. They saw the difficulties, challenges, and rewards of using the Project Approach. The paper notes that by using meaningful activities and projects in teacher preparation, students may gain a better understanding of these approaches and may be more likely to use them in their own classrooms. (Contains 19 references.) (Author/HTH)

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Using the Project Approach in Early Childhood Teacher Preparation

Gera Jacobs

Abstract

It is well known that children learn best through hands-on, relevant activities, such as projects. Students preparing for a career in working with young children can also benefit from working on meaningful activities and projects. This paper discusses ways to engage early childhood teacher education students in activities and projects that model the use of these methods in the classroom. It provides an example of a long-term project that took place in an early childhood education course. The project started with students participating in choosing a topic they were interested in researching: all-day compared with half-day or every-other-day kindergarten. Students helped to design survey and interview instruments. They sent surveys to every kindergarten teacher in the state, distributed parent questionnaires, and interviewed children at participating schools. They entered the data into spreadsheets and helped to analyze the results. The project developed over time, culminating in a presentation at the university undergraduate research showcase. Students gained firsthand experience in taking part in a project. They saw the difficulties, challenges, and rewards of using the Project Approach. By using meaningful activities and projects in teacher preparation, students may gain a better understanding of these approaches and may be more likely to use them in their own classrooms.

There are a great many things that new teachers need to learn before stepping into their first teaching positions: learning theories, knowledge of child development, curriculum methods, standards, developmentally appropriate practices (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997), and so much more. There are also many ways that teacher-preparation students can learn the important knowledge and skills they need. They can learn through discussion, lecture, and reading, as well as through hands-on experiences. These experiences can occur in the field through practica, internships, and student teaching. They can also take place in early childhood courses through activities such as project work and learning centers.

Research has shown that children learn best through meaningful activities. It has also shown that children's skills are much more likely to be mastered if they have the opportunity to apply them in meaningful activities (Katz & Chard, 1989). The same may be true of older students who can benefit from being actively engaged in meaningful activities (Jones, 1992; Rogers & Sluss, 1996; Vartuli & Fyfe, 1993). This paper discusses ways of engaging teacher-preparation students in worthwhile projects and activities that will help them gain knowledge, skills, and attitudes they will need to be successful teachers.

Using Learning Centers

Early childhood teacher-preparation classes can begin with lecture, discussion, or small group work. In addition to these activities, students can be given the opportunity to work at learning centers to gain additional information. These learning centers can be set up in a number of ways and on a variety of topics. For example, when students are studying about working with families, centers can be set up to allow students to explore this topic in depth. One center can have a variety of books that deal with working with families or have chapters on the topic. Another center could have articles on working with families, which students could read and critique. At a "computer center" with a computer connected to the Internet, students could explore Web sites that are useful to families, such as Family Village at *http://www.family village.wisc.edu*. Students could also watch and take notes on a

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short video, at a video center set up in the room, concerning parent/professional relationships. Another center could have family calendars that have suggestions each day for activities parents could do with their children. Students could examine the calendars and then be asked to make up their own calendar for a week or month that would encourage parent/child interaction.

Methods courses especially are a natural fit with learning centers. When students are learning about teaching math in developmentally appropriate ways, part of their class time could include working at learning centers that allow them to experience the benefits of hands-on activities and the opportunity to have some choice in which activities to do and how long to spend at each one. Students can visit centers with a variety of math manipulatives, such as unifix cubes, Cuisenaire rods, pattern blocks, etc., so they can see the variety of materials available. They can be asked to try some activities and see which ones they think children would benefit from using. They can design activities that children could do using these materials.

At another center, students could look through books such as *The Creative Curriculum* guides (Dodge & Colker, 1992; Dodge, Jablon, & Bickart, 1994; Dombra, Colker, & Dodge, 1997) or *Explorations with Young Children: A Curriculum Guide from the Bank Street College of Education* (Mitchell & David, 1992) to read from their chapters on how to help children learn math. They can also look through books such as *Story Stretchers* (Raines & Canady, 1991) or *Teaching Young Children Using Themes* (Kostelnik, 1991) to get more ideas on how to incorporate math into units, themes, or projects.

Students can try out highly rated math software programs for children using a computer set up in the classroom. At a library center, students can explore children's books such as *Anno's Counting House* (Anno, 1982), *How Much Is a Million* (Schwartz, 1985), and *1, 2, 3 to the Zoo: A Counting Book* (Carle, 1968). They can also read articles about teaching math from journals such as *Young Children* and *Childhood Education*, or ERIC Digests, and then discuss or write down what they learned through their reading.

Having students keep a record of the centers they were involved in, what they did at the center, and what they learned is a helpful way to document their learning. These strategies also provide another model they can follow in their own classrooms by showing them ways children can document their work (Jacobs, 1999).

Using Projects

Projects are another way for students to experience how an inviting, dynamic environment can encourage learning. Projects are defined as "an in-depth study of a topic or theme" (Chard, 1998b, p. 5). According to Katz and Chard (1989), projects can help children meet learning goals in the four major areas of knowledge, skills, dispositions, and feelings. Projects not only help children gain academic skills, social skills, and communication skills, they can help children form good self-concepts about themselves as successful learners. They can also help children gain positive dispositions toward learning. These favorable dispositions toward learning are critical to their future success. Similar dispositions and feelings may be formed by teacher-preparation students who have the opportunity to experience active, engaging work, such as projects and centers in their own coursework. As students are learning about how to use the Project Approach with young children, they can be engaged in their own project, learning and seeing the benefits of using this approach.

One of my goals as an early childhood professor is to help my students understand the Project Approach and have the skills necessary to use it in their future classrooms. I believe it is important for them to appreciate that "young children should have activities that engage their minds fully in the quest for knowledge, understanding, and skill...the Project Approach...provides a context in which all aspects of children's minds can be engaged, challenged, and enriched" (Katz & Chard, 1989, p. xi). I have lectured, shown overheads, had students read about projects, and shared examples of teachers who have successfully done projects. I have told them about the projects in Reggio Emilia (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1994) and shown them videos describing projects that children have done there. At the end of this last semester, though, I felt that my students

understood projects much better; they had participated in a project themselves.

Beginning the Project

We did not initially start out to try to do a project. Our purpose was to do some research together as a class. We discussed a number of possible research topics over several days, then decided to investigate the topic of all-day kindergarten. Many of the districts in the state were in the process of trying to decide whether or not to change their format from every-other-day kindergarten or half-day kindergarten to all-day-every-day kindergarten. As a class, we discussed what information we would like to find, how we might investigate this topic, and what sources of information we could use. We decided to ask parents, teachers, and children their opinions about the topic. We filled out the human subject forms and consent forms needed to conduct the surveys and interviews. Without being aware of it, we had just gone through the first phase of project work.

Developing the Project

As we started into the second phase, which involves fieldwork, implementation, and development work (Chard, 1998b), we developed a questionnaire that we sent to every kindergarten teacher in the state. This questionnaire included questions about the teacher's current daily schedule, the type of day each teacher thought would be ideal and why, and a variety of other questions related to kindergarten. We wrote a cover letter and obtained names and addresses from the state department of education. Students who knew kindergarten teachers wrote personal notes on letters to those teachers. Next came the task of putting on mailing labels, stamping return address information on envelopes to enclose, and stuffing the envelopes.

We discussed which districts we would ask to participate in our children's interviews. We chose four districts where we had good contacts, two that already had all-day-every-day kindergarten and two that did not. One of these districts had an every-other-day program, while the other had a half-day program. We developed interview questions for the children to get their views on going full time or part time, as well as questions on other kindergarten topics. We had lengthy discussions on how the kindergarten children might interpret the questions and which terms they might not understand. We discussed how to make things as clear as possible to the students. We also talked about how to make our interviews student friendly, so the children would feel at ease, and yet be systematic in our research to give it validity. Teachers in the schools provided us with times that would be convenient for the interviews. Students then signed up and went to the schools, conducting the interviews with one child at a time. The interviews were a great experience for the students. The interviews allowed them to get into the schools and talk one-on-one with kindergarten children, getting a little insight into their thinking.

We developed a parent questionnaire, which some of the schools gave to their parents. Students also interviewed parents they knew to learn more about the parent perspective.

Concluding the Project

We entered into the final stage of the project once most of the teacher questionnaires were returned and the children's interviews were completed. The students divided into teams to analyze individual questions. They entered the data into spreadsheets we had developed. When all the data had been entered and analyzed, students made charts to show the results. The charts were then used to make a poster display that they presented at the university undergraduate research showcase. This showcase gave students a chance to share what they had learned with the university community as well as visitors to campus. Students took turns during the day-long presentation to answer questions and explain the process to those interested in the work. Students were able to take home a booklet describing all the posters presented and received a certificate for participating. We took digital photos of the students at the showcase, and each student was able to have copies of these. This documentation of their work became part of a portfolio they compiled with the other work they had done throughout the semester.

Toward the end of our work, we realized we had experienced our own project. We had been through

all three phases of project work: Beginning the Project, Developing the Project, and Concluding the Project. Within each of these phases, we had included the five structural features of the Project Approach: discussion, fieldwork, representation, investigation, and display (Chard, 1998b). Students were able to gain insight into the thoughts of parents, teachers, and young children. They learned a great deal about how teachers structure their day and the kinds of activities teachers thought were beneficial for their children. The project provided us with opportunities for rich discussions. We had many discussions about the process we were using and what we were learning about our topic. We also discussed the similarities of this project to projects these preservice teachers might do with their own classes in the future and the benefit of participating in projects.

As with many other projects done in programs, this project was only part of our curriculum. We continued learning about new topics in early childhood through a variety of other methods, including discussion, lecture, and centers. We spent varying portions of the class time working on the project. There were days when the project would hardly be mentioned, while a few days were totally consumed with project work.

Conclusion

Students participating in projects and learning centers that are fulfilling and engaging realize for themselves the difference between taking part in meaningful projects and activities and merely sitting quietly through classes listening to a teacher. They experience the benefits of taking part in a project that results in new knowledge, not only for themselves but for sharing with others. Students participating in projects and learning centers in their classrooms often have the possibility of making choices during those activities. According to Chard (1998a), "one of the most powerful motivators for children in the classroom is choice. When children can make a choice from among a range of authentic alternatives and can choose when, for how long, where, and with whom to work, their motivation is likely to be greatly enhanced" (p. 16). The same may be true for older students as well. Students may also gain a deeper appreciation for and understanding of the importance of this type of meaningful learning. They will have experienced firsthand a constructivist approach to learning (Bufkin & Bryde, 1996) where they can take ownership and responsibility in co-constructing their own learning with their peers and instructors. Through these experiences, they will be better equipped to set up an environment that fosters this kind of learning for their own students in the future.

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